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The Creation of the Title of Righteous Among the Nations : 1953-1963

The expression of « Righteous among the Nations » is nowadays frequently referred to even by historians or social scientists¹. But this current use has not been put into perspective. There has been no study or analysis of the creation of the expression which refers to the institutional title. Rather than sustained studies, there have predominantly been opinions on the matter². In his study of the “American Experience of the Holocaust”, the one main author to attempt analysis, Peter Novick, denounces what he calls the “institutional use of the commemoration of Righteous Gentiles” which aims to stigmatize the “unrighteous majority” and more largely the non-Jews as a whole³. Mostly because it is the only extant analysis, this approach illustrates the need for a complete study of the genesis of the title, with special attention to the “intentions” at work in its institutionalization. This article aims to answer these two questions.

It appears that a clear and identifiable intention is very unlikely to exist. Indeed, for the word “intention” to make sense, it has to be linked to a conscience and to the individuals who enact it. In this case, the creation of the title took place on a period of time of more than twenty years and depended on the actions of a large number of protagonists. Indeed, in 1942, the wish to commemorate the “Gentiles” who had saved or helped Jews is already a part, albeit marginal, of the so-called Shenhabi Project, although it did not come into being until 1953⁴. That same year, reacting to the establishment of a Memorial in Paris, the government and the Knesset decided to pass a law in order to officially create the Yad Vashem Institute. In the first drafts and discussions of the text, there was no mention of the commemoration of “Righteous Gentiles”. No political intentionality on the part of the government can be

¹ In France, the last example may be « La part des Justes » in Michel Winock, *La France et les Juifs. De 1789 à nos jours* Paris, 2004, pp. 245-266. But, in this field, the anglo-saxon production is far more important. For a recent example, Martin Gilbert, *The Righteous. The Unsung Heroes of the Holocaust*, London, 2004.

² The other one is Berel Lang, « For and Against the « Righteous Gentils » », *Judaism*, 46, 1996, p. 95. His point of view is very closed to Peter Novick's one. More recently, a work made by an Italian journalist began to give elements on the creation of the title but through the eyes of Moshe Bejski who has long been at the head of the Commission in charge of the nomination, Gabriele Nissim, *Il Tribunale del Bene*, Milan, 2003.

³ Peter Novick, *The Holocaust and Collective Memory. The American Experience*, New York, 1999, p. 180.

⁴ Public version of the project, May 25 1945, Yad Vashem Archives, AM1/313.

attributed. The idea of commemoration of the Righteous, which eventually became the last line of the first paragraph of the act⁵ was the result of propositions by congressmen and the work of a parliamentary commission.

Still, once legally defined and counted among the missions of Yad Vashem, the title remained without any institutional and effective use for nearly ten years⁶. Here, again, as far as the empirical facts are concerned, the question of a linear and clear “intention” seems totally anachronistic⁷.

As for a large part of the memory of the Genocide, the Eichmann Trial plays a central role in the evolution of the situation. First, during the trial itself, the Public Attorney, Gideon Hausner, used this official expression several times to describe people or countries which had been friendly to Jews during the Second World War⁸. After the trial, in his book, he made direct link between his own references in the trial and the effective institutional reactivation of the title which followed⁹. However the effect of the trial is less causal and clear. It seems to have stimulated a great deal of individual and organized initiatives which ultimately lead Yad Vashem to take into account its original task of honoring the Righteous among the Nations. Indeed it had to protect its role when confronted by a situation in which the World Jewish Congress, and its charismatic President Nahum Goldmann, previously wanted to develop what they called a “World Council for “Hassidei Haumoth””¹⁰. Analyzed in details, these phenomena of actions and reactions make the genealogic approach a more nuanced way in which to understand what happened.

Finally, even when the decision had been made to create a concrete way of commemoration the Righteous, the direction of Yad Vashem had to redefine its form. Symbolically linked with the national idea¹¹, the plantation of a tree was initially proposed. But the first plantation ceremony led to a polemic on the case of Oscar Schindler. Confronted with public protests, Yad Vashem finally decided to create a special and independent commission. Headed by Moshe Landau, former President of the tribunal during the Eichmann Trial, it was built both as a judicial and an historical structure. Its first meeting took place on the 1st of February 1963.

Between memories, history and justice, through its very creation, the memory of the Righteous among the Nations cannot be reduced to a single intention of commemoration. As far as the scientific approach is concerned, the example of the

⁵ The official translation of the name is the « Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance (Yad Vashem) Law », August 19, 1953. This version can be read at the Central Zionist Archives, Z6-2030.

⁶ It does not appear at all among the points stressed on by the President of Yad Vashem in 1957, Ben Zion Dinur, « Problems confronting Yad Vashem in its Work of Research », *Yad Vashem Studies*, 1957.

⁷ For example, see the reports of activities of Yad Vashem and its correspondances with its partners, CZA, Z6/1829, Z6/1827, C6/420, C2/1135Z6/1956 and Archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, « 55/67 Israel Organizations ».

⁸ For example, Gideon Hausner's charge, hearing n°113, Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine, DCCLV-113.

⁹ Gideon Hausner, *Justice in Jerusalem*, London, 1967.

¹⁰ CZA, C6/27, C6/85 et YV, 116 946. Hassidei Haumoth is the hebraic word for « Righteous among the Nations », Eugen Korn, « Gentiles, the World to come and judaism : the odyssey of a rabbinic text », *Modern Judaism* 14, 1994.

¹¹ Yael Zerubavel, « The Forest as a National Icon : Literature, Politics and the Archeology of Memory », *Israel Studies* 1, Spring 1996, p. 60.

genesis of the title stresses the importance for social scientists of developing an appropriate methodology and gathering data which enable them to proceed to a solid analysis of memorial functioning.

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